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Releases

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BC Insulators Union and BC Federation of Labour call for immediate BC government action to provincially license asbestos removal firms after BC Supreme Court ruling permanently banning company that broke rules over 230 times, has not paid fines of $635,000 over 9 years

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VANCOUVER – After the BC Supreme Court permanently banned asbestos removal firm Seattle Environmental Consulting Ltd. and owner Mike Singh from the industry, the BC Insulators Union and BC Federation of Labour are calling on the provincial government to take immediate action to license all asbestos abatement companies.

The two labour organizations say with asbestos exposure being the leading cause of workplace death in BC – killing 53 workers in 2017 from asbestos-exposure related illnesses, predominantly mesothelioma – both workers and nearby residents need to be protected from asbestos.

Seattle Environmental Consulting Ltd. and owner Mike Singh have been permanently barred from working in the asbestos removal business by the court after WorkSafeBC issued over 230 orders to comply with health and safety laws designed to protect workers and communities from asbestos exposure – and after Singh and his companies were fined over $630,000 since 2010.

“This is one of the most outrageous cases of an employer exposing his own workers and nearby residents to deadly asbestos by repeatedly refusing to follow the law,” says Neil Munro, BC Insulators Union Business Manager, whose union represents trained, certified asbestos removal workers.

“But unfortunately, Seattle Environmental and Mike Singh are far from the only repeat offenders – there are more reported every single month by WorkSafeBC – and that has to stop,” Munro said. “Licensing all asbestos abatement firms and consultants would let the province pull their license and put them out of business immediately if they broke the law and refused to comply.”

BC Federation of Labour President Laird Cronk said the BC Supreme Court contempt decision shows the need for a wholesale series of changes to protect workers and also to create a comprehensive national strategy to ensure the federal government commitment to ban asbestos is implemented.

“The fact that a company could blatantly break health and safety laws regarding a known cancer-causing material, to expose workers and homeowners while knowing asbestos is the worst workplace killer in BC, is simply disgusting,” said Cronk. “This BC Supreme Court decision is a wake-up call to the province and to the federal government that action is needed to protect lives right now – there is no time to delay.”

Cronk said the recent federal pledge to ban asbestos was both welcome and overdue but a national plan to take strong action to enforce it is essential.

“We have asbestos in homes, in commercial, industrial and government buildings and we also have it in hundreds of thousands of brake linings in cars and trucks across Canada – any exposure to asbestos fibers can lead to mesothelioma and other fatal diseases, so we have to act now,” Cronk said.

Munro said provincial licensing is the key request his union made to the BC government’s recent asbestos regulation consultation – but there are far more changes needed to protect British Columbians.

He said an asbestos abatement licensing system would allow WorkSafeBC to stop companies violating health and safety laws from continuing to do business. Washington and Oregon states, the United Kingdom and Australia are among jurisdictions that already license asbestos firms.

In a detailed submission to the BC government review, the BC Insulators Union says WorkSafeBC issued 764 compliance orders in 2018 – on average two orders every day.

And even more disturbingly, WorkSafeBC also issued 95 immediate stop work orders to asbestos abatement employers because of the seriousness of the violations and risk to workers.

“Two compliance orders every day shows a blatant disregard for laws to protect workers from a cancer-causing substance that is BC’s number one workplace killer – that is outrageous and has to stop,” says Neil Munro, BC Insulators Union Business Manager.

“We have seen multiple occasions where asbestos removal health and safety laws have been violated in residential communities where older homes or buildings are being demolished or renovated – and where nearby residents are simply not being protected from potentially inhaling asbestos fibers,” Munro said. “And we have seen several media reports about unscrupulous contractors dumping bags of asbestos contaminated materials in back alleys in Vancouver and Burnaby instead of safely disposing of it.”

Munro says that in 2018 alone, WorkSafeBC issued 37 administrative penalties related to violations of asbestos regulations totaling $237,386 in fines – but only 17 have been paid in full, with $66,256 collected to-date.

There are other firms that owe hundreds of thousands of dollars in unpaid fines, with one company at well over $1 million owed to WorkSafeBC, Munro added.

And BC Supreme Court has issued 12 injunctions against asbestos employers at WorkSafeBC’s request – to force them to obey the law, Munro says.

The BC Insulators Union, which represents trained asbestos removal workers across the province, says there are several other important steps government needs to take in addition to provincial

licensing to make the removal, transportation and disposal of asbestos contaminated materials safe, including:

• Training and certification of asbestos workers, consultants and surveyors;
• Creation of new disposal sites across BC;
• Establish a rebate program for safe asbestos disposal;
• The Labour Ministry be the lead ministry to implement licensing and changes in coordination with WorkSafeBC;
• Develop BC-wide laboratory standards for asbestos testing;
• An awareness program on asbestos exposure in the automotive repair sector, where asbestos lining in brake pads and other parts can put workers at risk;

“Too many BC workers have already died from asbestos exposure – but we can and must save the lives of workers and residents who have not been exposed to asbestos – but could be any day due to a lack of adequate protection from this deadly substance,” said Munro. “It’s time to act, not delay.”

The full BC Insulators Union submission to government can be found here.